

Mini-Architectural Assessment of the Hlatshana Farmstead, 220 Murray Road, Hayfields, Pietermaritzburg



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1. Introduction

Debbie Whelan from Archaic Consulting undertook to complete a *pro-bono* mini report assessing the architectural structures that were inadequately handled in previous reports on the Hlatashana property at 220 Murray Road, Hayfields. This is with a view to properly assessing the structures in terms of the KwaZulu-Natal Heritage Act, and being able to make informed decisions regarding their destruction.

2. Methodology

Debbie Whelan visited the site on 7/07/09 and photographically recorded the buildings. Each building was then assessed in this report on its separate merits. The insides of the structures were not inspected.

In addition, due to historical information compiled in the past by the Natal Witness on this property, a call was made to the Witness with respect to this article and the information that it contained. This forms part of the history of the site in section 3. Due to the brief nature of this report, there was no visit to the Deeds Office to inspect the Land Registers for the property, nor any physical visit to the Provincial Archives Repository, which would have been carried out in the event of a full Architectural/historical Impact Assessment.

3. History of site

Until recently, the house was inhabited by the last surviving member of the Foxon family. Joyce Holmes ran an active farm on the property, known in the nineteenth century as 'Lark Hill'. Following is an extract from the Natal Witness with respect to the passing of Joyce Holmes and some of the history of the Hlatshana property.

Natal Witness Thursday May 29 2008: Margaret von Klemperer

THE death of Joyce Holmes last month at the age of 96 will mean change for one of the city's historic homes - Hlatshana, at the corner of Hesketh Drive and Murray Road.

In April 1951 The Witness carried a story about the centenary of the farmhouse, built of shale quarried on the farm which, at the time, extended over 700 acres almost to Bishopstowe. Hlatshana (meaning little bush) had already been in existence for 30 years when the Foxon family bought it from the Tomlinson family, and changed its name from Lark Hill.

Now 38 acres of the farm remain, where until three years ago Holmes kept a herd of Jersey cows and a dairy. When she was almost 90 she was tossed by her Jersey bull, and although her shoulder was badly injured, it would take more than that to make her give up her cattle.

Indomitable seems to be the word that would have best described Holmes. On my recent visit to Hlatshana to meet members of her family who are now deciding the future of the property, the stories sound almost like fiction. But as we walk through the large, white-carpeted rooms, with peacocks, geese and swans outside in the garden, it becomes easier to visualise the teenage parties her nieces attended, the bull-tossing incident, or Holmes driving off to the Hayfields shopping centre in her white Jaguar - which is still in the garage - and wearing her white-framed sunglasses to do her shopping. She continued to drive until a couple of years ago.

Holmes, whose maiden name was Tarboton, was educated at Girls' Collegiate in the city, and trained as a teacher. But her ambition was higher - in 1938 she went to England to learn to fly,

and qualified as a pilot. During the war, Holmes joined the airforce and was stationed at Valhalla in Pretoria where she trained pilots on simulators for the Airspeed AS.10 Oxford, the twin-engine aircraft used for training air crews in navigation, radio-operating, bombing and gunnery.

In 1940 she married Siegfried Foxon (so named because he was born during the Siege of Ladysmith) and came to Hlatshana as a bride. She stayed in the airforce until her son, Tony, was born in 1943, but kept up her pilot's licence and continued to fly from the Aero Club at Oribi until finally the regulations said she was too old. Her husband died¹ when her son was only five, and with Hlatshana entailed so that it would eventually be inherited by Tony, the male Foxon heir, she continued to run the farm - the home she loved - as well as teaching at Girls High School for 10 years, and continuing to fly.

It was a passion her son shared. He joined the South African airforce and qualified as a pilot of both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. Tragically, in 1967 when flying Water Board officials over what would be the site of Hazelmere dam, his helicopter collided with unmapped power lines and crashed, killing all on board. Holmes would later campaign tirelessly for the introduction of warning devices to make power lines visible to pilots.

Shortly after Tony's death, his mother married Neville Holmes, a judge in the Appeal Court, and would then fly herself to Bloemfontein when the court was sitting. They made various alterations to the farm house, including adding an upper storey, built from the same shale.

Now more changes seem inevitable. The house is empty, and its future undecided. While the main farmhouse has been altered, there are outbuildings on the property - stables and other smaller structures which date back well into the 19th century. Family legend states that one of them was used to store ammunition during the Anglo-Boer War. But what will happen next remains unknown.

It is thus inferred that the site was an early grant dating back to at least 1850, and would have proved a viable farmstead given its proximity to the market in Pietermaritzburg and the wagon road from Durban. The Foxon occupation of the property continued over some 120 years.

The conditions of grant stipulated residence on property, thus the original house, noted in the Witness Article above, could have feasibly dated back to 1851.

¹ MSCE 0 2458/1953 Foxon, Siegfried Ernest. Born in Ixopo, Natal. S/Sp Foxon, Joyce Kathleen. Born Tarboton. Deceased Estate. 1953

4. Assessment of structures

The Hlatsana farmstead consists of a variety of agricultural buildings clustered in close proximity to the main house. They are situated close and parallel to Murray Road which leaves the bulk of the site empty. Adjacent and to the north of Outbuilding 4 is a mobile phone tower, which limits further development. The entrance is located in the proximity of the main house, and to the south is a mobile home (outbuilding no 7) and a reservoir and water tower (outbuilding no 8)

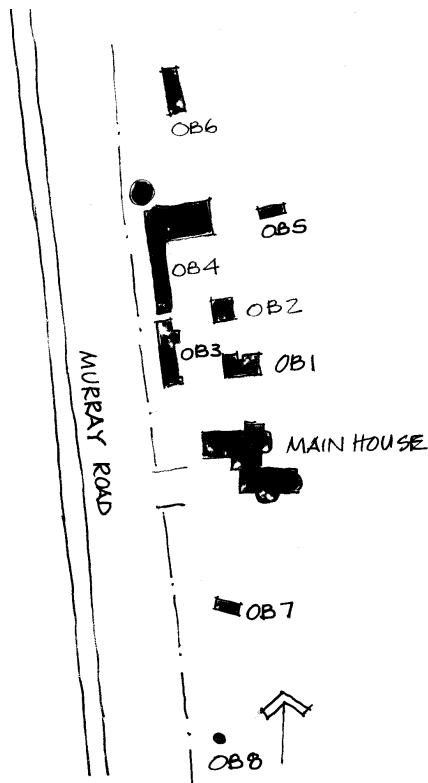


Fig 1: showing the layout of the structures that comprise the Hlatsana farmstead

4.1 Main House

The main house is unusual as it is one of the few representatives of Bauhaus-type modernism in Pietermaritzburg, and especially so as it is constructed of vernacular material (shale) rather than plastered and painted white or of brick. It is understood that the house occupies the site of an earlier, Victorian structure, which formed part of the original farmstead. (an inspection of the Land Registers would illuminate further on the property divisions and owners of the house)

On entrance from Murray Road, a sweeping pergola of stonework forms a screen to the utility section, and directs the visitor to the south, to the main entrance way. The massing of the house is a main two story volume orientated east west with a parapet running around the periphery that conceals the fall of the roof below. This appears to have been added on in the 1970's.

The elevations around the house are consistent- a mix between a Georgian aesthetic and a modernist paradigm, with banks of equally proportioned windows continuing an aesthetic flow. The condition of the structure is good, and it forms an imposing landmark in the area.



Fig 2: main house from north-east



Fig 3: main house from north-east



Fig 4: main house from south east



Fig 5: detail of window plaster and shale wall



Fig 6: main house from kitchen



Fig 7: main house from south-west



Fig 8: main house from entrance showing shape constructed pergola

The position of the house creates an entrance to the farmstead located to the north. It is a solid and imposing structure and is in good condition. It is a singular example of a vernacular modernism which combines the palimpsests of historical development on earlier structures. It is an unique example of a working farmstead in close proximity to the city, as well as having associations with historic events and people.

Significance of structure

Main house	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	high	medium	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	high	low	low	low
Historical significance	medium	low	low	low

4.2 Outbuilding 1

Outbuilding 1 consists of two shale structures under a double-pitched corrugated iron sheeting roof. They are connected, but are orientated in opposition. The building which is located on the farmyard has a skylight to the north, and the second building has a tie rod in the gable with a spreader bar in the form of a cross. Given the nature of the materials used and the genre of construction, these structures would feasibly date to the mid to late -nineteenth century. In addition, it understood that these may have been used as an armoury during the Anglo-Boer War.



Fig 9: Outbuilding no 1 from south east showing rear of outbuilding 2



Fig 10: outbuilding 1 from south east



Fig 11: Outbuilding no 1 from north east showing tree growing onto the addition

The condition of these structures is good, given their age. This structure does form part of a group comprising the farmyard.

Significance of structure

Outbuilding 1	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	medium	low	low	low

4.3 Outbuilding 2

Outbuilding 2 is part shale, part recent brickwork and part painted 'watcrete' type prefabricated concrete wall. The main part of the building is under mono-pitch corrugated iron sheeting. The original structure, being the shale building, appears to have been added onto through accretions over the years. The structures are generally in good condition. This structure does form part of a group comprising the farmyard.



Fig 13: outbuilding 2 from main farmyard showing outbuilding 1 behind

Significance of structure

Outbuilding 2	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	low	low	low	low

4.4 Outbuilding 3

Outbuilding 3 is located at the entrance to the farmyard and has elements of earlier structures constructed of brick (painted white) which have been subsumed by concrete block. It consists of a number of different elements under a Harveytile roof which has disparate pitches and an incoherent architectural language. This structure does form part of a group comprising the farmyard.



Fig 14: outbuilding 3 showing disparate roof pitches



Fig 15: outbuilding 3 from entrance to property



Fig 16: outbuilding 3 from farmyard



Fig 17: outbuilding 3 from entrance

Significance of structure

Outbuilding 3	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	low	low	low	low

4.5 Outbuilding 4

This L-shaped complex consists of open sheds under corrugated sheeting, an old shale feed barn dating back to the nineteenth century, stables and accommodation tucked into the corner which are most likely contemporary with the barn, given the corrugated sheeting (gospel oak) and constructed trusses. This structure serves to enclose the yard, with outbuildings 1,2 and 3 forming the other components. Hard against the barn is a reservoir and a mobile phone tower.



Fig 18: showing open shed connecting outbuilding 3 and the stables



Fig 19: mobile phone tower and reservoir to north of the barn



Fig 20: barn from east with stables in the background



Fig 21: showing condition of sheeting and trusses



Fig 22: interior of barn showing collapsed truss at end



Fig 23: showing accommodation in the corner and the stables to the left



Fig 24: showing stable block connecting open barn and accommodation

The open barn is of no significance, being in poor condition but does serve as a linking mechanism in connecting the yard as a whole.

The stable block is of shale and brick under corrugated sheeting and is in relatively good condition. It forms an important architectural element in rhythm and consistency. The accommodation (or perhaps feed room) located in the corner is of brick painted white.

The old barn is of shale with corrugated sheeting, is reasonably substantial in terms of scale, and apart from collapsing timbers, is in reasonable condition. This structure does form part of a group comprising the farmyard.

Significance of structure

Outbuilding 4	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	low	low	low	low

4.6 Outbuilding 5

This is a free- standing structure that does not form part of the farmyard group. It is of more recent construction, and it is doubted whether it is likely to have been constructed over 60 years ago. It is a simple white painted un-plastered building, with a double-pitched corrugated sheeting roof and appears to have functioned as accommodation.



Fig 25: Outbuilding 5 from south east



Fig 25: outbuilding 5 from east showing location of the farmstead in the distance

Significance of structure

Outbuilding 5	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	low	low	low	low

4.7 Outbuilding 6

Outbuilding 6 is a brick constructed stock run which is located far from the farmstead. It has a cranked corrugated sheeting roof. It is of recent construction.

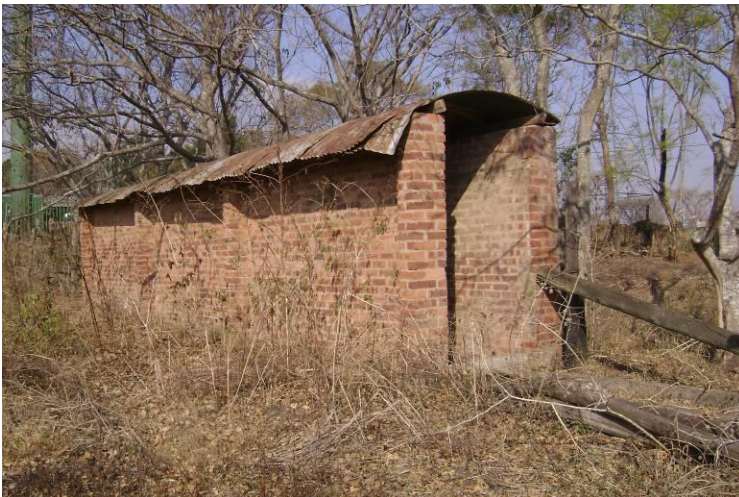


Fig 26: stock run



Fig 27: stock run from east

Significance of structure

Outbuilding 6	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	low	low	low	low

4.8 Outbuilding 7

This is a mobile home raised on a masonry plinth. It has no architectural, historical, social or technical merit.

Significance of structure

Outbuilding 7	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	low	low	low	low

4.9 Outbuilding 8

Outbuilding 8 consists of a reservoir constructed of shale and a water tank base constructed of brick. It is located distant from the rest of the structures and elements of it are more than likely to date to the early settlement of the farm. This structure does not form part of a group comprising the farmyard.



Significance of structure

Outbuilding 8	local	regional	National	international
Architectural significance	low	low	low	low
Technical significance	low	low	low	low
Scientific significance	low	low	low	low
Social significance	low	low	low	low
Historical significance	low	low	low	low

5. Conclusions

The main house is a good example of a vernacular form of the Bauhaus Modernist movement, rare in KwaZulu-Natal and should be kept and reused. It is in good condition, and the opportunity exists for reworking the interior spaces to form an elegant series of rooms for reuse.

The possibilities that working in historic environments create are often ignored in the formation of new urban fabrics. The structures that form this complex, including the house, have a simplicity and uncontrived honesty which could well be used as an architectural departure point for new work, as well as the manner in which enclosure is created with the different buildings. Ideas and forms too, can be indicators for new architectures, such as the water towers which are strong markers of a pastoral landscape and can be reinterpreted in new work.

The structures that comprise the Hlatshana farmstead form a coherent enclosure which is inextricably linked to the main house itself. The architectural language of the enclosure, although individually the buildings may have little merit, is strong. Their position next to the road, leaving the remaining hectareage free for construction is a good opportunity to retain some of the original topophilia of the area, yet at the same time rework the site with contemporary density and architectures. Whilst a good scheme would honestly involve the re-scaping and reuse of farmstead in its entirety (except for outbuildings 5 though 8) it is recommended that in the worst case, the main house should be retained and the outbuildings be demolished to make way for new structures.